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ABSTRACT

A wave of criticism has been leveled at standardized achievement tests of basic skills. Part of the debate concerns the types of tests administered, such as the Standardized/Norm-Referenced tests, Criterion-Referenced tests, Minimum Competency tests, National Assessment of Educational Progress tests, alternatives to standardized tests, IQ tests, and aptitude tests. It is argued that data generated by using any method of testing can potentially be misused. That is why the American Association of School Administrators has chosen to state its position on a number of vital testing issues, including the following: (1) norm-referenced testing; (2) criterion-referenced testing; (3) teacher-made assessments; (4) truth-in-testing legislation; (5) curricular alignment/teaching to the test; (6) overtesting; (7) beyond standardized testing; (8) making fair comparisons; (9) releasing test scores; (10) minimum competency testing; (11) district testing experts; and (12) a national curriculum. (SI)

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Testing

Where We Stand

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American Association of School Administrators

"Student testing in America's schools is at a critical juncture. Leadership with vision at all levels—local, state, and federal—will be needed to make the right choices for the future."

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Student testing and evaluation are essential to sound educational decisions in the nation's public schools. However, the testing issue is bathed in controversy.

A recent wave of criticism has been leveled at standardized achievement tests of basic skills. Some have expressed concern that the results of those tests are often misinterpreted or misused. Others are alarmed by what some call "the norming gap."

The state role in funding education has increased, and so have state demands on local schools. Seasoned educational observers have watched as state policymakers increasingly rely on standardized test scores, once used mainly as indicators of student achievement, to meet their demands for school district accountability.

Many educators have added their voices to the chorus of protests against using a single standardized test score as a "gatekeeper" for grade promotion or graduation. Yet, in 1985, half the states used or planned to use minimum competency testing for high school graduation.

There are even more concerns. For example, most standardized achievement tests measure *traditional* basic skills.

However, these are limited in their ability to measure higher level thinking skills...skills needed to prepare students and our nation for the 21st century.

Many testing experts contend that it is time to push for a new generation of assessments that will measure higher order thinking skills and actual performance. At the same time, these new assessments will need to satisfy the public's demand for better information that will help them guage how their schools are doing.

Developing and using performance-based tests has traditionally been a time-consuming and costly process. Nonetheless, some states are expanding the types of tests in their repertoire. Of particular concern is the need to generate more sophisticated information that can be used to even better evaluate an area of curriculum by testing a small sample of students.

Student testing in America's schools is at a critical juncture. Leadership with vision at all levels—local, state, and federal—will be needed to make the right choices for the future. That is why the American Association of School Administrators has chosen to go on record on a number of vital testing issues ranging from "truth in testing" to "teaching to the test." The position statements found on pages 8 - 14 have been adopted by the AASA Executive Committee.

Forms of Testing: Uses and Misuses

A student testing explosion is taking place inside America's classrooms.

In 1986-87, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) reported that 44 states required student testing. Most of that testing focused on the traditional basic skills, especially math and reading. Reasoning skills, writing, and citizenship were tested in six states, and six others tested science and social studies.

Testing takes many forms. Here, we provide brief descriptions of just a few.

Standardized/Norm-Referenced Tests

Most standardized tests used by school districts are prepared by commercial publishers. They are norm-referenced, meaning they are intended to allow simple comparisons among classes, schools, districts, and states. They tend to be highly reliable for large groups of students over time, and they are relatively inexpensive. Some school districts use special classes of standardized tests, such as the Stanford Diagnostic Reading test to evaluate Chapter 1 student progress.

However, educators express frequent concerns about standardized tests. Those concerns include:

- Test scores alone are insufficient for individual diagnosis, decisions on student placement, resource allocation, and policy analysis.
- Standardized tests have come under recent attack for using outdated norms. In nationally normed tests, half of those students who are tested will be above the norm and half below it. Although the norming gap has been closing, test results that use grossly outdated norms may create the illusion of scores that are higher or lower than they appear. (To "renorm" a test, a field study is conducted to determine whether a new norm is needed. Generally, norms have risen.)
- In some cases, these tests may not measure what is actually being taught.

Criterion-Referenced Tests

These tests are designed to test mastery of individual skills or bodies of knowledge actually taught in the classroom. For example, a criterion-referenced test might show whether a student is able to handle decimals or double-digit fractions. Generally, these tests are not useful for making comparisons beyond an individual classroom.

Criterion-referenced tests do have some drawbacks.

- The quality of the tests can suffer if the teacher lacks skill in designing them or interpreting results.
- Unless the tests cover specific objectives actually taught by the teacher, results will be deficient.

Minimum Competency Tests

Minimum competency tests, often prepared

by state department of education testing offices or by commercial test publishers to track student progress, are now required in two-thirds of the states. Critics charge that minimums too often become maximums.

National Assessment of Educational Progress

The NAEP samples student knowledge and skills in math, reading, writing, and science. The tests are administered periodically to 9-, 13-, and 17-year olds. Beginning in 1990, NAEP's math assessment will collect detailed information that will make state-by-state comparisons possible.

Alternatives to Standardized Achievement Tests

Several members of the Coalition of Essential Schools, an effort begun during the 1980s by Theodore Sizer, have explored some alternatives to traditional testing methods. Those alternatives are based on the "exhibition of mastery" principle. That "exhibition" might include student portfolios, oral exams, and other forms of more performance-based assessments.

A number of states also are developing innovative ways to measure student performance. Vermont, for example, is designing a new student assessment based on work portfolios (e.g., student writing samples) as well as test scores. Connecticut, meanwhile, has developed standardized scoring methods to measure actual performance in science, in foreign language, and in several vocational areas.

IQ Tests and Aptitude Tests

One of the most recognized aptitude tests is the Scholastic Aptitude Test. A prominent IQ (Intelligence Quotient) test is the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale. Usually,

these tests are used to predict vocational or educational success.

Used properly, these tests can help teachers work with students to develop reasonable expectations. Used improperly, they can serve as a basis for assigning students to specific "tracks." Many thoughtful educators feel that tracking can lead to the expectation that certain students will only be able to perform at certain levels. Of course, expectations can directly affect performance and even the *opportunity* for a student to perform.

AASA also is opposed to the sole use of college entrance exams, such as the ACT or the SAT, in determining whether a potential student actually will be admitted to a college or university.

Conclusion

Data generated using any method of testing can potentially be misused. Such misuse can lead to inappropriate educational decisions for individual students and poor education policy. Therefore, school leaders must ensure that tests are properly administered, scored, and interpreted, no matter what type of test is used.

States continue to develop or require school districts to develop their own systems for collecting and using data on student and school performance. Therefore, school leaders need to ensure that student achievement test scores are placed in the proper perspective.

Achievement and competency test scores are simply not enough, especially when comparisons are drawn among schools, districts, or states. They must be integrated with and take into consideration other data, such as graduation and attendance rates; class size; per-pupil spending; student demographics; and levels of community support.

AASA Position Statements on Testing Issues

1. *Norm-Referenced Testing*

AASA supports more frequent renorming of standardized achievement tests to ensure their usefulness and dispel any perception that scores have been inflated. School leaders are encouraged to convey norming information to both staff and community and to pressure testing companies to continue their efforts to close the norming gap. (Of course, school districts have the ultimate responsibility for determining what is appropriate in testing students and what forms of testing should be used.)

2. *Criterion-Referenced Testing*

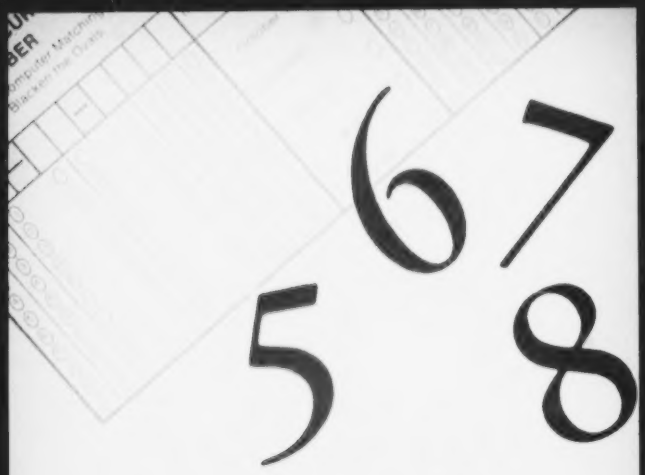
AASA believes criterion-referenced tests can be used effectively to measure the skills and knowledge of most individual students. The results of these tests can provide valuable information for teachers and administrators in meeting the educational needs of each student. However, schools generally are expected to report standardized test results to the public. Therefore, school leaders and the testing industry should continue to develop methods for making the results of these tests more reportable to the public.

3. *Teacher-Made Assessments*

AASA believes assessment instruments, including paper-and-pencil tests produced by teachers to measure what actually is taught in the classroom, can be excellent measures of student learning and program effectiveness. However, school districts and schools of education must ensure that teachers have the training needed to design these tests, to guarantee their correlation with instruction, and to interpret and use test results.

4. *Truth-in-Testing Legislation*

AASA believes truth in testing legislation that requires full disclosure of test questions will neither improve tests nor make them fairer. AASA objects to any law that might undermine the accuracy, validity, and/or reliability of tests. However, the association supports public access to information about the nature of a test, what it measures, the scaling method used, and the limitations of the test.



5. *Curricular Alignment/Teaching to the Test*

AASA opposes "teaching to the test" for the purpose of inflating test scores. School districts should insist that teachers not bend to the pressure of aiming their instruction directly at a specific standardized test. To do so is to allow the testing company to control the school district curriculum. This practice can lead not only to inflated scores in certain areas of instruction, but also to declines in critical areas not covered by the test. Direct teaching to the test serves neither the students nor the public. AASA does support curriculum alignment when interpreted to mean that the curriculum is taught and tested. This type of alignment can enhance instruction and aid in remediation.

6. *Overtesting*

AASA urges local school districts to ensure that tests students are required to take are actually needed. Unnecessary testing actually diminishes time for instruction. AASA believes evaluation of student progress should be reflected in a much broader range of measures than those provided solely by standardized tests. Therefore, the emphasis should not be placed on standardized tests alone.

7. *Beyond Standardized Testing*

AASA believes a broad range of measures should be used in developing any accountability system. Those measures should extend beyond standardized testing. School districts and states alike are encouraged to support efforts to make alternatives to current tests of students and school performance both valid and reliable.

Because a single best accountability system does not exist, AASA believes each district and state should design its own. That system would very likely include several different and appropriate types of assessments and gather information on a variety of performance indicators. School districts and states are urged to share information with each other on effective testing practices.

8. *Making Fair Comparisons*

Comparisons of test results within and among school districts or states should be fair, accurate, constructive, and indicate the limits of those comparisons. For example, socioeconomic conditions and percentages of students actually taking a test can have a profound effect on actual test results and limit authentic comparisons.

Nationally, AASA supports in principle a congressionally approved experiment by the National Assessment of Educational Progress that will result in state-by-state comparisons of student achievement. Such comparisons have the potential for providing a valuable way to monitor trends in student progress at the state level. AASA urges states to participate in this voluntary effort to help guide the content of these tests and to define the testing to be used. However, AASA will evaluate the actual state-by-state indicators generated in the national math assessment in 1990 before

deciding whether to give its full endorsement.

9. *Releasing Test Scores*

AASA strongly believes the public has a right to know and understand how their public schools are doing locally and in relationship to other schools, districts, and states. However, comparisons should be made only when they are valid.

AASA urges school leaders to assist the news media in fully understanding the implications and limitations of test results and to help the media avoid invalid comparisons. Similar efforts should be made to inform parents and the community.

School leaders should present a full report on student achievement to their communities. That report should not necessarily be limited to standardized test scores. When appropriate, the report should indicate how the school system will use the scores to improve education in the district. Reports on test results, in some cases, will need to be tailored to fit the particular needs of an audience. Teachers, for example, may need a much more detailed report than other groups because of their direct involvement in instruction.

10. *Minimum Competency Testing*

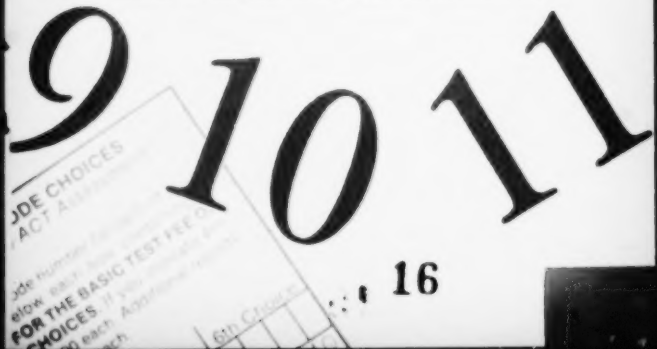
The demand for school standards continues to grow. In some cases, those standards are applied to student learning and results are measured through state or local minimum competency tests. While these tests can serve a valuable function, AASA cautions school districts to recognize and publicize the limitations as well as the strengths of these tests. In some cases, allowances must be made to accommodate certain groups, such as special education students.

AASA opposes the growing trend toward basing graduation and promotion decisions on minimum competency tests. AASA is especially concerned about the use of commercial standardized tests to decide on promotions from kindergarten to first grade. When it does occur, this type of high-stakes testing places too much emphasis on one test and ignores the valuable judgment of teachers and administrators. They are the ones who can make more informed decisions by analyzing a student's performance and readiness rather than placing emphasis solely on the results of one standardized test.

11. *District Testing Experts*

AASA believes each school district should employ or have direct access to an evaluation or measurement specialist whose main function is to advise the district on testing issues. This person might also be involved in explaining to staff, the public, and the media what tests measure, the results, and the limitations of the tests. In addition, the specialist should:

- Help the district in the selection of appropriate standardized tests, and become well-versed on which tests are available, test reviews, and other sources of testing information.
- Gather information to create a complete report card on the district, including an outline of demographic information and other outcome measures such as student



attendance and dropout rates. That report card would help put test scores into perspective for parents and the public and reflect the unique nature of both the student population and staff.

- Ensure that all teachers are capable of designing their own "teacher-made" tests and interpreting various types of tests used to measure and ultimately enhance student achievement.
- Serve as a liaison with testing companies in an effort to encourage them to develop better tests, including those that are performance-based and measure higher-order thinking skills, and to encourage renorming of tests as frequently as needed.
- Spearhead district involvement in encouraging the federal government to support research that will lead to the development of assessment measures that go beyond standardized testing.

12. *A National Curriculum*

AASA believes school districts should strongly resist testing efforts that would lead to a national curriculum. A curriculum that is driven by standardized achievement tests and does not reflect actual local learning objectives serves neither the best interests of students nor the public's need for accountability.

Vigilance will be required to ensure that the authority of local school districts to determine their own testing policies is not eroded by attempts to make testing patterns more systematic. School leaders should closely monitor the progress of any congressionally approved experiments that include state-by-state comparisons of student achievement to make sure those comparisons are not used to shape a national curriculum.

Reliability and Validity

While many testing terms deserve attention, we have chosen to assist the reader of this statement by providing basic definitions of just two, namely reliability and validity.

- **Reliability.** This concept generally refers to the ability of a test to measure the same thing every time or the degree of consistency between two measures of the same thing. How reliable a test is depends on the purpose for which it is used.
- **Validity.** This concept refers to a test's ability to measure what it purports to measure. It is the single most important aspect of a test. The term, validity, can be oversimplified to mean truthfulness or, more specifically, the extent to which certain inferences can be made from test scores. How valid a test is also depends on the purpose for which the test is to be used.

Going Forward

AASA urges school leaders to consider these 12 position statements. Use them as a basis for policy development and spirited discussion. Place them on the agendas of key meetings to raise the thinking of staff, board, and community about the strengths and limitations of various types of tests. Consult them when responding to inquiries from the news media and others who frequently seek information and points-of-view on testing issues.

As leaders for learning, school administrators, teachers, and board members are expected to be prime sources of information about testing. We hope *Testing: Where We Stand* will be helpful to school systems in addressing testing issues and in making sound decisions about measuring student and school performance.

Acknowledgments

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This project was undertaken because the Executive Committee of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) wanted to go on-record on a number of testing issues. Our thanks goes to each of the Committee members for their comments and suggestions.

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The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) is the professional organization for nearly 19,000 educational leaders across the United States and Canada and in many other parts of the world. Members include superintendents of schools; other central administrators; building level administrators (principals); college and university administrators and professors; and administrators from other local, regional, state, and national educational agencies.

Major activities of the association include: the National Academy for School Executives (NASE), National Executive Development Center (NEDC), publications designed to increase the knowledge and skills of educational leaders, governmental relations, conventions, and minority affairs. Special groups within the organization work to assist administrators in small, rural, suburban, urban and regional school districts.

The annual AASA Convention, held in February each year, is designed to provide educational leaders with knowledge and skills that will provide an even better education for students. The annual Legislative Conference, held in the fall in coordination with the American Association of Educational Service Agencies, brings legislators and administrators together in a setting that allows for two-way communication and increased effectiveness.

The American Association of School Administrators, founded in 1865, is one of the most longstanding and prestigious of the nation's educational leadership organizations.